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ABSTRACT

Educational policy decisions are political and are affected by demographic, economic, and social factors that influence policy-makers. As the number of federal government programs grew from the 1960's to the 1980's, so did the number of special interest groups lobbying in Washington, District of Columbia, to promote legislation, regulations, and decisions favorable to their clientele. Education is represented by over 100 educational organizations, and the differing orientations of these groups can cause disagreements. Some groups are more political than others and have more influence, such as the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers. The formation of coalitions between groups can result in increased influence as this is probably the most effective way for special interest groups to have an impact on policy. One such coalition is the Committee for Education Programs, a coalition of 80 organizations. Other less broadly based coalitions work to enhance certain aid programs and others are spawned by the enactment of the aid programs themselves. The effectiveness of narrow special interest groups is evidenced by the fact most federal aid to education has been designated for specific programs or populations. In 1981 the Educational Consolidation and Improvement Act consolidated many educational aid programs into an education Block Grant and funding for other programs was reduced. However, the political environment is subject to change. Currently, education is high on the national agenda and, in fiscal year 1984, Congress added 1.2 billion dollars to the federal budget for education. (MD)

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THE POLITICS OF FEDERAL AID TO EDUCATION

A presentation at the
69th Annual Meeting of the
Association of School Business
Officials, Phoenix Arizona,
October 4, 1983.

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A widely accepted, formal definition of politics is, "the set of interactions that influence and shape the authoritative allocation of values".

Unless you have been introduced to that definition before and have had time to give it some consideration, it can be a difficult one to use.

I personally prefer an understanding of politics which was succinctly put in the title of a book by Harold D. Lasswell almost fifty years ago as, "Who Gets What When How." This definition, although perhaps considered by some to be rather crude, seems to me to go to the crux of things.

Most of us long ago gave up the notion that education was somehow apolitical; that is, apart from or above politics. In education, policy decisions concerning finance, management, community relations, and the content and process of instruction itself are political.

These decisions are affected by demographic, economic and social factors which influence the choices of educational policy makers. There is a give and take that occurs in the environment created by these factors which is the very essence of politics. As time goes on, conditions change and educational policy-makers are continually faced with new political realities that need to be addressed.

It seems that the general society has become increasingly more politically sophisticated. Expressions such as "coalition building" and "networking" have become commonplace and many organizational and professional publications now include articles concerning the political aspects of organizational and personal

inter-relationships.

In the most recent continuing education brochure issued in my home school district of Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk, New York, a relatively rural district, there is a course offering on "How to Lobby". It is listed between "Flower Arranging" and "Knitting I" almost as though one might regard lobbying as a desirable household skill.

We generally refer to the efforts of special interest groups as they seek to "shape" or "influence" policy and organizations of all kinds and persuasions appear to have learned the art and craft of politics. In the past decade or so, there has been a proliferation in the number of special interest groups that have located offices in and around Washington, D.C.

As the number and value of individual federal government programs grew from the mid-1960's to the 1980's, more and more special interest groups came to realize the usefulness of establishing a presence in Washington, where important decisions affecting their interests were being made.

There is a very broad spectrum of special interests now represented in the Washington D.C. area, including those with a very narrow agenda such as the United States Gymnastics Safety Association to those with broad appeal such as the American Heart Association.

The basic purposes of each of these representative agencies are to promote legislation, regulations and administrative decisions that are favorable to their clientele and to convey information on their activities and needs from their grass-roots

membership to federal policy makers.

Education alone is represented by well over 100 educational organizations representing teachers, administrators, school boards, parents and even students. The different levels of education, higher, elementary and secondary, and continuing, and various academic areas such as mathematics and foreign languages all have organizational representation.

In addition, educational interests that cut across the different levels and academic areas including libraries, urban education and education for the handicapped are represented.

Although all of these groups are interested in furthering education, because of their differing orientations they do not always agree on specific objectives or on the ways and means of influencing decisions. Disagreement can even arise when organizations have a similar constituency such as when the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) took opposite sides on the issue of establishment of a federal Department of Education in 1979.

Some special interest groups are more politically oriented in their activities than others and some have relatively more influence than others. Relative influence can be greater if the group:

1) has a large membership as does the NEA,

2) is affiliated with other groups as the AFT is through membership in the AFL-CIO union,

3) can provide technical information that is consistently reliable,

4) can provide other important services to policy-makers,

and

5) pursues a fairly narrow agenda of objectives.

The effects of large membership and affiliation with others obviously contributes to influence through strength in numbers. Providing reliable information and other services contributes to a longer term process of building credibility and trust. Policy-makers, particularly members of Congress, often have very tight schedules of meetings, public appearances and attending to specific constituent requests and inquiries. There simply isn't enough time for each individual member of Congress to study every issue in depth. Consequently, if a particular interest group can consistently provide relevant and useful information on an issue to a policy-maker, it can be to their mutual benefit and increases the impact that the special interest group has on the development of policy.

In terms of other services, volunteered time and material assistance during elections, providing speaking opportunities, endorsements of candidates and editorial support in organizational newsletters and in the general media are examples of how groups can increase their influence.

Pursuance of a fairly narrow agenda, enables a group to focus, perhaps more consistently and with greater persistance, their resources and energies on fewer objectives, thus enhancing the possibilities for success.

The formation of coalitions can result in the utilization of all five of the means of increasing influence mentioned previously and is probably the most effective way for special

interest groups to have an impact on policy.

The combined memberships of the agencies in coalition contributes strength in numbers. Information may be provided more accurately because of the broadened base of knowledge, skills and experiences. A pooling of resources might also lead to a greater diversity and amount of other services. Finally, a more narrow agenda has to be adopted by the coalition simply to permit different groups to act cooperatively. Without some common understandings and objectives, and agreement on strategies, the coalition could not function effectively.

One broad-based coalition of education interest groups is the widely respected Committee for Education Programs, a coalition of about 80 organizations. This coalition, originally known as the Committee for Full Funding of Education Programs, was first formed in the early 1970's in response to then-President Nixon's attempts to create block grants and reduce appropriations for education programs. It's primary objective has remained to reduce the difference between federal aid program authorizations, or maximum funding amounts established in enabling legislation, and actual amounts annually appropriated for programs in the federal budget.

Other, less broadly based coalitions, work to preserve and enhance certain federal aid programs such as Chapter I of the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (ECIA) a program for disadvantaged children, and the programs supported by the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA). These coalitions include federal and state level program administrators, congressional supporters, local school district administrators, teachers and

parents.

Some special interest groups are spawned by the enactment of the aid program itself, such as the Parent Advisory Committees which were a statutory requirement of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Others, may have existed previously, but were strengthened by later legislation as were the advocates of special education programs by the enactment of Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act and P.L. 94-142 which created the EHA programs.

The effectiveness of narrow special interest groups in past years is evidenced by the fact that most federal aid to education programs are categorical, that is for a specific program purpose or to serve a specific population of students.

However, President Reagan was successful in doing, a decade later, what Nixon had failed to do. Through the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (ECIA) of 1981, many of the categorical aid programs were consolidated into an education Block Grant. Also, appropriation levels for certain other programs were reduced.

Demographic, economic and social conditions had changed considerably over the decade to create a different political environment, one in which both "big government" and public education were under heavy criticism.

Some of the factors that contributed to the altered environment were:

1) a continuing decline in the number of school-age children,

2) a decline in pupil standardized test scores,

3) the unionization of teachers and instances of teacher militancy including strikes,

4) so called tax revolts by citizen groups,

5) a growing public perception of excessive federal government intrusion and regulation,

6) increased competition between different groups of public service providers, and

7) the school finance reform movement which resulted in greater amounts of state aid for schools.

The decline in school-age children, of course, has meant that fewer families have as direct or as long standing an interest in the schools and that fewer adults are going to support the schools as opposed to other public expenditure purposes such as senior citizen centers, public recreation areas, police and health services.

The decline in standardized test scores has given the public the impression, however much these scores may be influenced by other factors, that the schools are failing to properly educate children. Further, it appeared to many people that the federal aid programs had failed to make a difference.

Teacher unionization and teacher militancy had the effect of dividing those in education and of adding to public disenchantment with public educators generally.

Proposition 13 in California, similar tax control measures in other states, and the defeat of school budgets in record numbers signaled taxpayer resistance to ever-increasing taxes. This, coupled with a growing public antipathy toward government

regulation and perceptions of federal government intrusion into matters that were formerly decided by state and local authorities, were important factors leading to the consolidation of programs and reductions in federal program appropriations.

At the same time that various education special interest groups increased their political sophistication and activities, other public service providers did the same. Consequently, the intensity of competition between and within the public service areas increased, at times for fewer available funds. Education itself is often one of the lower priorities at the federal level, below social security, medicare and welfare. Within education itself, higher education may be given somewhat greater attention than elementary and secondary education because of the increasing number of part-time adult students and because financial aid programs have benefited the middle class as well as low-income students.

The Reagan administration has cited many times that education is not, after all, constitutionally a federal responsibility. The finance reform movement in fact has resulted in many states taking a stronger position in educational matters, and more particularly, in providing a larger share of the financing.

However, to end on an optimistic note, the political environment is always subject to change and it appears that important changes are currently underway. Although opinion polls have shown that the general public has always placed a high value on education, "A Nation at Risk", the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, as well as the other

national reports that followed in its wake, have now put education high on the national agenda. This has already resulted and will continue to result, in many positive outcomes for education.

Congress has added $1.2 billion to the FY 84 federal budget for education, and has passed a resolution in support of the Department of Education. Most of the Democratic Presidential candidates have developed proposals for new initiatives in education, and for greater amounts of federal aid. And, to cite a final example of the change in the political environment and in the current status of education, a national summit conference on education is being planned by the federal government.

It may seem, given a federal budget deficit of about $200 billion, that lobbying for additional federal resources for education is somehow not in good taste or puts the interests of education above that of the nation. However, considering the important social, economic and civic benefits of education and the fact that federal aid to education only totals about $16 billion out of a federal budget of about $850 billion, the appropriations for education hardly seem a prodigality. The recent tax cut was itself $100 billion. If problems exist in the federal budget, it is not because too much is appropriated for education. Rather, it might be that changes need to be made in federal spending priorities and taxing policies and, knowing the allocation of resources is determined by politics, that educators and others interested in the well-being of education could more effectively influence those policy decisions that affect federal aid to education.